Declassified and Approved For Release 2011/12/21 : CIA-RDP90-00965R000706950061-1

26 May 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C 7

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Clash at Arenales

One of the worst-kept secrets in the Reagan administration's not-so-secret war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua is that the U.S.-supported contras operate out of bases in Honduras—a nation that is technically at peace with the leftist regime in Managua.

This has resulted in some border clashes, with Sandinistas chasing contras into their Honduran sanctuaries. The Honduran army has reacted by moving the contras farther in from the border.

Our associate Jon Lee Anderson was on the scene during a recent incident. Afterward, the border area was sealed off to the press. Here's what happened:

En route to a contra camp on the border in a rented jeep, Anderson and his anti-Sandinista guides encountered a rush of Honduran refugees on horseback, mule and foot. They were fleeing from Arenales, a border town near the contra base at Las Vegas, where our associate was heading.

The refugees reported that a barrage of rockets had rained down on their town, followed by the appearance, in Honduras, of Sandinista troops. Contra troops were fighting the Sandinistas around Arenales, they said.

In Las Vegas, a few miles farther on, our associate was greeted with something less than enthusiasm by Enrique Bermudez Varela, military commander of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the main contra group.

The reason soon became clear: Bermudez said he was afraid news of the Sandinista incursion would embarrass the Hondurans and put him and his men in a tight spot.

He was also uneasy because our associate had recognized Tom Posey, head of Civilian Military Assistance, an Alabama-based paramilitary group that has been supplying and training the contras. Posey was accompanied by another young American volunteer; both were dressed for combat and armed with rifles.

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea," Bermudez explained. "We don't accept mercenaries. These people want to help, and they provide training that we can't because we have to concentrate on the fighting."

As a matter of fact, our associate later learned that Posey and the other American were indeed on a training mission. Shortly after he saw them, they went into Nicaragua to train selected contra units in the use of their recently purchased portable surface-to-air missiles. The contras planned to use them against the Sandinistas' Soviet helicopter gunships, which are expected to be deployed in the border area any day now.

The contra base at Las Vegas—on the border just inside Honduras—was almost deserted. Bermudez explained that too. After a Sandinista rocket attack from Soviet-supplied World War II-vintage rocket launchers, Bermudez had ordered the dismantling of the Las Vegas base and dispersal of his troops along the border.

Another factor in the decision, Bermudez said, was the recent influx of materiel at the contra camp, which he didn't want the Soviet rockets to destroy. At about the time last month when Congress vetoed further aid to the contras, Bermudez said, the contras received a massive infusion of guns, ammunition and other supplies that were about equal to what they had once gotten from the CIA.

Bermudez wouldn't identify the source of the weapons and ammo, saying only, "We have some good friends." But our associate saw boxes with Korean lettering on them.

Ever optimistic, Bermudez said the new supplies would allow him to do what he had been hoping to do for a long time: infiltrate his guerrillas back across the border into Nicaragua. Last fall, the contra units had been forced to retreat back to Las Vegas because of dwindling supplies.

By the time our associate had reached Las Vegas, the Sandinista shelling of Arenales a few miles away had ceased. The next morning, when he drove to the town, the crash of rockets could be heard, but the shelling had moved from Arenales itself to the border a short distance away.

Arenales had been deserted by its residents. Contra patrols came and went, and the 20-man Honduran army garrison busied itself digging bunkers.

Our associate learned that the day before, about 1,200 Sandinistas had crossed the border in an attack evidently intended to capture Arenales and move on to the Las Vegas base camp. But the contras pushed the invaders back across the border, killing at least 20 in the process. As many as 30 contras died, plus three civilians in Arenales.

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